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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000595

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TAGS: [KWBG PREL IS GAZA DISENGAGEMENT ISRAELI PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS](#)

SUBJECT: HAMAS WINS BIG IN GAZA ON "CLEAN GOVERNMENT"

PLATFORM

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: The Hamas sweep in the local-level Gazan elections of January 27 does not indicate a mandate for Hamas overall or broad-based support for continued armed struggle against Israel, according to numerous Embassy contacts. While Fatah compiled a list of candidates perceived as corrupt -- in many cases the family members or cronies of Fatah leadership -- Hamas-backed "doctors and professors" reportedly known for honesty and integrity were the choices among the 72 - 90 percent of eligible Gazan voters who cast their ballots. According to Fatah sources, the party will more carefully compile its candidate list for the April municipal elections and the July PLC elections. End Summary.

The Voting by the Numbers -- Hamas Wins Big

2. (SBU) Election observers from the Palestinian Center for Human Rights/Gaza told Poloff on election day January 27 that, "some glitches aside," the voting was a success and went smoothly without incidents of violence. According to some observers, 90% of eligible voters turned out, while initial data from the Higher Committee on Local Elections put the number at 72%. Of those who voted, 85% reportedly registered with the Central Elections Committee (CEC), and another 30% were listed on the civil register. One observer reported that despite an overnight shooting in Rafah, the early morning surge of prospective voters on election day caused polling station officials there to call for PA police assistance to organize the waiting crowd.

3. (SBU) According to the Higher Committee on Local Elections, 414 candidates -- including 68 women -- competed for 188 seats in ten municipalities, and voters cast their ballots at 176 polling stations. The size of the ten municipal councils varies from 9 seats to 15, depending upon population. Of the 118 seats up for grabs in the January 27 elections, Fatah-backed candidates took a mere 39, while Hamas-backed lists campaigning under the title the "Change and Reform List" won 76 seats. Two independents also won seats, as did one individual affiliated with the PFLP. According to PCHR, seven of the ten municipalities who carried out elections elected Hamas-dominated councils.

The Palestinian Anti-Vote

4. (SBU) Mohammad Almbaid, head of USAID's Tamkeen civil society project working with local NGO election observers, mused January 31 that a segment of the population voted against Fatah rather than for another candidate or organization. Some of these voters wanted to register a protest vote against Fatah's record of governance to date, he said, and others wanted to underscore to Fatah that it cannot take for granted the political dominance it has thus far enjoyed. Almbaid argued that the local elections were taken much more seriously than the presidential elections, as evidenced by the drastically higher turnout for the former. Furthermore, he explained, family and tribal connections were critically important -- more so even than party affiliations -- in local elections as opposed to presidential.

5. (C) Abdulsamia Effrangi, a politically savvy and mainstream Fatah member who was involved in developing the Fatah candidate lists, told Poloff January 31 that he and several others within the Gaza Fatah machine had predicted "trouble coming." The composition of the Fatah candidate lists, he said, was influenced by individuals like Rashid Abu Shabak and others "interested in preserving their own influence," and weighted towards favored candidates rather than electable ones. Effrangi claims to have advised Fatah to revise the list, since many of the names that appeared were among those known and reviled among the public at large, but said his recommendations were not adopted. When Gazans went to the polls, he argued, they in many cases cast their vote for "anyone but the Fatah candidate."

Hamas Win Not a Mandate for Armed Intifada

16. (C) Both Effrangi and Almbaid, cautioned against viewing the outcome of the elections as an out and out victory for Hamas per se, or as a mandate for the continued armed struggle against Israel. Of the 78 "Hamas" candidates elected, Effrangi estimated that only 30-35 or so have any genuine affiliation with the organization, and that to varying degrees. The remainder was what Effrangi termed independent, "clean" candidates who share or are identified with Hamas' anti-corruption or "clean government" platform, and who were thus supported by Hamas. Pepsi CEO and Gazan business leader Mohammed Yazgi noted that Hamas had fielded "doctors and university professors who had nothing to do with Hamas before elections," but whom Hamas knew would be popular with voters.

17. (C) Effrangi and Yazgi contended that Fatah must take a "good long look" at its bad reputation among the Gazan public before assembling candidate slates for the next round of municipal elections in April, and certainly before the PLC elections set for July 17. Effrangi said he intends again to recommend that Fatah make better efforts to assess candidates' electability and popularity among voters as major criteria for their inclusion on the list. Yazgi noted, however, that Hamas has already put together another "strong list" that may threaten Fatah again. In his view, Fatah must either postpone upcoming elections -- a move that may only strengthen accusations of corruption -- or act quickly to overhaul its method of candidate selection.

What Does the Future Hold?

18. (C) Of the several observers and pundits with whom Poloff spoke, none seemed to fear that the Hamas sweep would mean the imposition of a "radical" agenda or free reign to militant activity. On the contrary, the comment heard repeatedly was "Let them govern and we'll see if they can do it." The Egyptian Charge d'Affaires told Deputy Chief of Mission that the significance of the Hamas victories should not be exaggerated. While Hamas has a solid core of adherents, the vast majority of voters were Gazans whose position would change in response to improvements in their economic situation. Observers from Tamkeen and PCHR, as well as various other local contacts agreed that the PLC elections in July will be hotly contested, more so perhaps than even these local elections. While it is clear from these elections, at least to some, that Fatah must take steps to put its own house in order if it is to perform more convincingly in upcoming municipal and PLC elections. Its best opportunity to do so, however -- during the Fatah 6th Conference scheduled for August 2005 -- will take place after these elections have been held. Another factor affecting Fatah's fate at the polls, according to many PA officials who have spoken to ConGen officers, will be PA President Mazen's performance in the coming months, measured by the extent to which he can show Palestinians that their lives have improved under his leadership.

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